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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S MUSLIM PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER VISITS
ISRAEL

1. (SBU) Singapore's highest ranking Muslim official, Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi, made an official visit to Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Kuwait from November 7 to 13. Abdullah's delegation included a cross-section of ruling party MPs -- R. Ravindran (a Hindu of Indian descent), Dr. Warren Lee (an ethnic Chinese Christian), and Zainudin Nordin (a Malay/Muslim). The editor of Singapore's Malay-language newspaper, Berita Harian, accompanied the group to provide favorable press coverage and images, Ravindran told poloffs. Berita Harian covered the visit extensively, but downplayed the greater time spent in Israel relative to the quick stops in the Palestinian Territories and Kuwait. The paper prominently showed Abdullah laying a wreath at the tomb of Yasser Arafat, but did not mention the delegation's briefing on Israel's defensive wall. Because of the balanced itinerary, the stop in Israel does not appear to have generated any backlash in the region or among Singapore's Muslim minority population, noted an MFA official.

2. (SBU) The trip was part of Singapore's efforts to "gain greater understanding" of the Middle East, but did not yield any concrete results. The GOS has offered to provide some personnel training for Palestinian Authority officials, but details are still being worked out, noted MFA. (On November 29, Singapore announced it would partially fund training institutes in Qatar and Jordan to teach public administration and vocational skills.) Singapore's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Kuwait is stalled while Kuwait seeks approval from the Gulf Cooperation Council to move forward with the bilateral deal, according to Ravindran. In a follow-up visit, the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament came to Singapore November 24 to 27, the highest ranking Israeli visitor since 1993.

FERGIN